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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2933
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001112

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK
P FOR HERRO MUSTAFA
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/28/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MAJORITY LEADER SAAD HARIRI NOT IN
FIGHTING MODE

REF: A. BEIRUT 1104
[B](#). BEIRUT 1103
[C](#). BEIRUT 1100
[D](#). BAGHDAD 2298

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) Majority leader Saad Hariri accuses Syria and Hizballah of masterminding recent violence in Tripoli as part of an effort to discredit Saad and impose Syria's agenda on Lebanon. As usual, Saad complained about what he perceives as an ambivalent U.S. policy toward Syria, warning that March 14 could not confront Hizballah without strong international support. Saad was upbeat on his recent trip to Iraq, which he hoped would help ease Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon. However, he was more pessimistic on the domestic front, where he predicted March 14 would be forced to make concessions on the ministerial statement. Finally, and of concern to us, Saad was unwilling to discuss strategies for leading his coalition to electoral victory in 2009, arguing the time was not yet ripe. End comment.

[2](#). (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by A/DCM and Senior LES Political Advisor, met with majority leader Saad Hariri at his residence in Qoreitem on July 28, the first meeting with the Embassy since Saad's trip to Iraq. Hariri notetaker Nadine Chehab also attended the meeting. Saad was in one of his defeatist modes, noisily fingering prayer beads during the entire meeting and leaving his unlit cigar untouched.

SYRIA AND HIZBALLAH
BEHIND TRIPOLI VIOLENCE

[3](#). (C) Saad accused Syria and Hizballah of masterminding the recent violence in Tripoli (Ref A) to lure the international community into believing that Tripoli is nesting Islamic extremism and radicalism, all in an effort to discredit Saad. Instead, he claimed, the people who are fighting on both sides are individual groups without central leadership, which is more dangerous. Saad claimed that the Alawites fighting against Sunni are trained by Hizballah and connected to Syrian intelligence. He believed the arrest by the Lebanese Armed Forces of one operative, Abou-Fadi Aroun, in the Bab el-Tebbaneh area would disclose the true motives and identity

of the perpetrators. He also predicted the situation would flare up again unless people in Sunni-dominated Bab Tebbaneh took over the Alawite area of Jabal Mohsen, but warned that this would result in a massacre.

14. (C) Saad argued that Syria will incite violence in Lebanon any time it has an issue to push, whether in Tripoli, Saadnayel (Biqā,) or Sidon. As the Syrian regime is being rewarded by the international community, Syria will not be deterred, he said. He lamented the role played by French President Sarkozy and the European Union for opening their doors to President Bashar Assad, adding that France would not do so without a green light from Israel and the U.S. He credited March 14 lobbying of the White House with canceling A/S Welch's planned meeting with a visiting Syrian delegation, criticizing the U.S. for having no clear policy vis-a-vis Syria.

15. (C) Saad said he still favored establishing diplomatic relations with Syria, but noted that historically Syria (and not just the Asad regime) has never recognized Lebanon as an independent country. Saad did not believe Syria was serious about establishing an embassy in Lebanon, arguing instead that Damascus was buying time until the U.S. elections and playing games with the French in the meantime.

16. (C) Saad also claimed Hizballah is attempting to create a new Sunni leadership by weakening him. Saad said he remains opposed to fighting a new civil war in the country, despite the fact that some of his supporters view this as a weakness. As a result, many people are moving away from the Future

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Movement he leads and going back to the traditional leaders who are protected by Hizballah. Nevertheless, he stated confidently, Sunnis in Lebanon will never be part of al-Qaeda, and even those who become radicals will only fight against Hizballah.

17. (C) Asked about his message to his Sunni constituents in Tripoli, Saad said there is no solution to the crisis outside the frame of the legitimate government institutions such as the cabinet, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and the Internal Security Forces (ISF). He claimed the LAF is capable of solving the crisis in Tripoli "in one night" if it wanted, but the current acting commander, a Druze, could not use force to settle the problem, as it could backfire on Druze leader Walid Jumblatt in his home Chouf district.

IRAQ TRIP: PROMOTE
ARAB UNITY, NAJAF

18. (C) Saad called his recent trip to Iraq (Ref D) very good in that it shocked both Hizballah and the Shia. His purpose was to portray the Shia-Sunni conflict as an Arab-Persian conflict, i.e., a political and not religious conflict, making Arabs realize that although Shia will govern Iraq, they are Arabs and not Iranians. Another goal was to reinforce the position of the holy city of Najaf to counter the Iranian influence represented by Qom. Saad said he would follow up on his trip by visiting other Arab countries to promote Arab support for the government of Iraqi PM Nour al-Maliki. In his view, it was "obvious" Iraq was moving "away from an Iranian agenda," which he predicted would have a "tremendous" impact on Lebanon.

19. (C) While he realized that his efforts are a long-term project, Saad said he believed the Iraqis are moving away from the Iranian influence, and success in Iraq will help improve the situation in Lebanon, as a lot of Shia will shift their religious alliance to Najaf. Furthermore, independent Shias are more at ease meeting with him because of his increased credibility following his meeting with Sistani, which lessened perceptions that he is "an American agent."

LESS OPTIMISTIC
ON THE HOME FRONT

¶10. (C) Saad was less optimistic on the domestic front, warning that eventually March 14 will have no choice but to cave into Hizballah's demands. "We do not want to be sitting ducks," he explained. "Instead of Hizballah taking things by force, we will give them what they want peacefully. Hizballah breeds on instability, and we do not want to offer them this." He added, however, "I am ready for a fight if I have the required support."

¶11. (C) Saad noted that some U.S. critics accused March 14 of relying exclusively on international support, but countered that March 14 needed western support to counter Iranian and Syrian support for Hizballah. He added ironically, "I was criticized for welcoming Samir Kantar, while Under Secretary Burns sat on the same negotiating table with the Iranians, those who are funding Hizballah, who secured Kantar's release."

¶12. (C) Saad confirmed reports (Ref B) that a Qatari emissary would arrive soon in Beirut to find a compromise on the ministerial statement, but added that the Qataris are "tilted towards compromises that cost March 14." The Qataris are a "dream come true for us," he said sarcastically; "They are resolving everything in Lebanon." Saad also defended Jumblatt's efforts to seek a compromise with the opposition, saying, "Jumblatt needs to duck and cover." Commenting on reports (Ref B) that the Aoun bloc was now insisting on revisiting Lebanon's Paris III commitments, Saad said, "After they win one thing, they go for another."

LET DUST SETTLE BEFORE BEGINNING 2009 CAMPAIGN WORK

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¶13. (C) Saad said he still believes in the goals of March 14, but that it was too early to begin planning for the 2009 parliamentary elections, which could wait until summer was over (Note: Saad's advisor in Washington told Charge Sison he planned to spend August vacationing in Monaco. End note.) People had not yet digested the May events, he explained. Furthermore, March 14 leaders' "heads were too big" following the recent battles over cabinet formation, and March 14 needed to let hard feelings subside. However, Saad disclosed that he was planning to gather March 14 leaders for a meeting soon to present a unified front.

¶14. (C) Pressed again on his strategy for winning the parliamentary elections, Saad said he would begin his own campaign during Ramadan (Note: Saad traditionally hosts 1,000-invitee Iftars each night during Ramadan for his supporters. End note.) Again skirting the issue, he said he was confident March 14 would gain 78 seats out of the 128, but that "even if we have this majority, we will not be able to rule because the issue of Hizballah's weapons will not be resolved."

COMMENT

¶15. (C) We are very familiar with this side of Saad, critical of the U.S. and defeatist in his approach to Syria and Hizballah. However, we should not discount his words as mere whining. His Sunni followers do feel bruised and betrayed following the May events. Few within March 14 have much of an appetite for another confrontation with Hizballah, whether on the ground or in the ministerial drafting committee.

¶16. (C) Of perhaps more concern is Saad's failure to focus on what we view should be his top priority: preparing his coalition for the 2009 elections. He showed no signs of taking action in response to the Saudi ultimatum (Ref C)

warning him that 2009 is his last chance. Ramadan begins in early September, which may be a useful time for Saad to rally his own supporters, but may not be the best time for March 14 coalition-building. And following that, the legislative elections are only a short six months away. March 14 already has a late start in the race to 2009 behind the more disciplined and focused Hizballah-lead opposition, and Saad's delay will not help to tip the balance back to the majority's favor. End comment.
GRANT